



The Big Why: A Novel

Michael Winter

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Michael Winter's powerful new novel, *The Big Why*, brilliantly fictionalizes a pivotal year in the life of celebrated American artist Rockwell Kent. In 1914, at the age of thirty, Kent decides to escape the superficial world of New York City and move to Brigus, Newfoundland, with his wife and three children to follow a few months later. A socialist and a philanderer, certain in the greatness of his work, he is drawn north by a fascination for the rocky Atlantic coast and by the example of Brigus's other well-known resident, fabled Arctic explorer Robert Bartlett. But once in Newfoundland, Kent discovers that notoriety is even easier to achieve in a small town than in New York. As events come to a head both internationally and domestically and the war begins, Kent becomes a polarizing figure in this intimate, impoverished community, where everyone knows everyone and any outsider is suspect, possibly even a German spy. Writing in Kent's voice, Michael Winter delivers a passionate, witty, and cerebral exploration of what makes exceptional individuals who they are--and why.

Shortlisted for the Trillium Award

The Big Why: A Novel Details

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From Reader Review The Big Why: A Novel for online ebook

Sharon says

This book by Michael Winter is a very different sort of historical fiction. It recalls a specific time in the life of the American artist Rockwell Kent when he goes to Brigus Newfoundland just before the beginning of the First World War. A lot of the book is spent exploring Rockwell's inner thoughts as they especially relate to whether in life we got to be who we are, and if not, why--that is the big why. His descriptions of those early fishermen and sealers is riveting. In one incident, when a long overdue boat finally came into harbour, he describes the crew carrying a frozen seal "but the seal was not a seal. It was the pelt of a seal, and inside the pelt was a frozen man." Hearing about the Newfoundland of these early years and listening to the thoughts that Kent struggles with in his relationships with the community of Brigus as well as his personal ones keeps this book humming along.

Lindsey says

This would normally not be a book that I was interested in: not my kind of themes, writing style, etc., but Michael Winter's sentences are so beautiful and poetic. If he can hold my interest in a cheating vegetarian artist in Newfoundland, it has to be good!

Lynn Bornath says

I didn't like Kent, I didn't like the random punctuation, and I wouldn't say I liked the book exactly but I did admire it. Winter is a talented writer and this book made me curious enough that I will probably check out more of his work. Read the full review.

Jane Weeks says

I chose this book from the library specifically because it takes place mainly in Brigus, Newfoundland. I've traced my paternal family back to the early 1700s in that area.

I enjoyed all the tales about Brigus, especially as most of the characters are drawn from real life. The story was a fascinating fictionalized introspection by a well-known artist, but I can't say that I actually enjoyed it. I've not read any other books by Michael Winter, so I don't know if his strange lack of apostrophes and clauses-as-sentences is his usual style. I got used to it, but it was off-putting.

Steven Buechler says

While this was a great piece of fiction, it was also an excellent introduction to the life of Rockwell Kent AND a great look at life in Newfoundland at the first part of the 20th Century.

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"When the war began the tree lost their leaves. And I thought, Why trees, why green, why the futility of it. I was caught up in the belief of progress, and now I saw turmoil. There was chaos. I read about entropy. If you left a pile of bricks and time was infinite, then a moment would arrive when the bricks and time was infinite, then a moment would arrive when the bricks, through random change, would form a wall. That was my thought. But this is not true. The bricks, without work injected into the system, will become a simpler structure. They prefer to turn to dust. I saw the world now starved of energy from the sun. It was turning to dust. It was returning to a simpler form. It was becoming nostalgic. Nostalgia can be good. It is incorrect to think of nostalgia as merely the pain one feels in returning to home. Memory never matches the reality of home. Nostalgia is the friction between home itself and the memory of home. A friction that turns time to dust.

All my life I've wanted to strip sentimentality from nostalgia and be left with the hearkening. With the strange newness of return."

Jennifer says

a dollar store find

Sheila Zakre says

I read this book because my grandmother, Rose Foley, was friends with both Rockwell Kent and Bob Bartlett. She is actually in the book, although the only accurate thing about her is that she was known for her singing. The clash of cultures-- New York versus small port in Newfoundland, is accurate. I have a letter from Rockwell Kent decades later to my grandmother in which he excoriates those infamous Newfoundlanders who ostracized him. My grandmother said he just got people riled up. The author, who never knew about this period, despite being a native Newfoundlander, wrote an entertaining book.

Jim Landers says

Even in the times in my life in which I felt lost, I couldn't relate to any of the characters or situations. The whole thing feels like a train wreck waiting to happen. And the philosophical conversations didn't do anything for me. I was immediately turned off by the incomplete sentences and lack of punctuation, but eventually I got in the flow of it. I did appreciate a few lines here or there, but mostly I just kept thinking: I'm only ___ far done with this book!

Silas White says

Winter is a master of the mundane (sharp and hilarious observations of how people interact, behave in daily life), which is great when you're in the mood but can be a little slow-going sometimes. However, it's worth the wait in *The Big Why*, which works its way up to obsessively engaging in the final section. The character development of Rockwell Kent is brilliant.

Kevin says

A remarkable waste of time for the reader, though one senses the author enjoyed the exercise a great deal. A forgettable tale of an artist experimenting with selling his talent for a monthly stipend, who subsequently then must find the definitive value of his output, thereby bumping in the question of what is the price for a man's time, and man's labor, and man's love? This is a pretty good starting place but as the artists is challenged by worth and value he is also subjected to the even-more vexing questions of what is a worthy subject=matter for a painter and is it aimed at the common or the arbitrary as a "real art," wahre Kunst? The answer, tho not stated, was apparently "Whatever the hell you want." Art, in this fictional character and in this author, is not about the viewer/reader but about one's own meandering asides, diatribes and predilections.

The text seems a Meandering artist rendition of life. The artist focuses on random points in his life and then seemingly characterizes them well. The author seems to focus on random word play and crafts them expertly, but this is the successful life of a self-absorbed fool written as a series of insights coupled with myriad, casual, soulless betrayals.

Describing the the urbane universe of Edwardian New York (e.g. Newfoundland) the confining, leaning claustrophobic, journey the within the lead character's mind is withering if not wholly forgettable. One pathetic and pointless, indefensible action after another spread of a Follet-like expense is like wandering into a dim fog on a chill day, nothing to see nothing to note.

In short he does not begin to answer the question of the title, except for the implied, "Why not?"

Meghan says

Only halfway through, but the imagery of New York City and Newfoundland in the 1930s rocks. All about a man torn between personal ambitions and desires to explore and run away and his responsibilities to his wife and children... Clean and spare language but damn evocative.

Paula Dembeck says

This is an historical novel based on the life of Rockwell Kent, an American painter from New York who spent a year and a half in Newfoundland from 1914-1915. He was a man who sometimes preferred to be a human being on a quest for the good life rather than be an artist. Now later in life, he looks back on the time he spent in the small town of Brigus pursuing that goal and how that experience almost broke him.

We go back in time to shortly before the war. Kent is fed up and bored with the superficiality of New York and the current movement in the art world away from realism to impressionism. He wants to go to Newfoundland to lead a pure and natural life and have its customs and culture influence his work, making it unique. He had tried a move to Newfoundland once before and failed, but this time he is determined to succeed.

Rockwell is not a sympathetic character. He is a bohemian, an arrogant, vain and selfish man who neglects his family. He has a condescending manner and feels the world should mold itself to fit his needs. He hurts those who love him and does not experience remorse when he does so. He feels he just is who he is, and should not apologize for it.

When he married his wife Kathleen, he told her he loved her but he might not always be faithful to her. He found other woman attractive and was always ready to press himself against any woman who would allow it. Kent acknowledges he is a man with large appetites, but he feels he is honest about it and therefore should not be judged. He is a man of strong views, and against many things. He staunchly believes the way to be against anything is to rant and argue and never be conciliatory.

Eventually, that proved to be his undoing.

Kent travels to the small town of Brigus Newfoundland, finds a small abandoned home and starts to renovate it so his family can move in later. During this time he lives a solitary bachelor life and enjoys it. He makes a few friends, among them Tom Dobie a young sixteen year old farmer, fisherman and carpenter who helps with the renovations, and Bob Bartlett a famous Artic explorer who had been the captain on Robert Peary's expedition to the North Pole. Kent is invited to participate in the town's life. He helps out in the fishery and the locals welcome and include him in their community. In the summer, his wife and two children arrive and settle in. Kent feels content and confident he has found a place where he will live the rest of his life. He feels that living among these people, he will become a better man and thus a better painter.

But it is not long before Kent's behavior begins to bother people. He openly flaunts his wealth as he pulls five dollar bills from his pocket while others are living on credit. They stare outrageously at the carved figurehead of a naked lady he has nailed above his door. They are stunned by his concern for his tools lost at sea on a downed freighter rather than for the ship lost at sea with many of the men from the town. And then tries to rile up the fishermen to form a union. The mood shifts quickly. They begin to notice he never seems to work. They do not understand the solitary and isolated life of a painter and they openly wonder what he does all day and how he gets his money. The people who had once involved him in their life no longer want to see him and seem annoyed at his presence. They begin to question his motives and his loyalties, and feeling he must respond, he goes out of his way to antagonize them further.

The war brings another precipitous downslide in their affections. Kent questions the men's desire to sign up and join the European War, saying it will never benefit the working class. He openly talks of his love of the German culture and language, and some interpret that as a love for German political action, quickly pegging him as a German sympathizer.

Kent feels he must respond, but he does so by taking provocative action, writing letters of complaint to the press and painting a German eagle on his studio door underneath the sign Bomb Shop. He refuses to have his mail opened by the customs inspector and is accused of secreting maps to the enemy. His midnight walk on the rocky shore with a lantern has the locals thinking he is sending coded messages to German submarines in the harbor. He openly cheers on POWs at work in the fields. Soon he is openly accused of being a spy, and the prime Minister expels him.

As he digs himself in deeper with the locals, his wife begins pushing away from him. Her anger grows and her love for him begins to leave her. Eventually Kent realizes he is spending his entire time building up his defenses rather than growing as a person. He comes to accept that the move to Newfoundland is a doomed venture and agrees to leave with his family. His marriage to Kathleen will last five more years, and then there are two other marriages that follow, also accompanied by divorce.

As an older man, Kent has settled down on a farm (again with another woman), and looks back on his life from a different point of view. He seems to be a happier man and a better person. He now realizes that in the past he thought he was a good artist, but now he knows for certain that he was only mediocre.

The question, "the big why" for Kent was whether he ever got to be the person he really thought himself to

be. As we met him toward the end of his life, he seems to have at least part of the answer to that question.

Winter has an unusual writing style, avoiding the accepted grammatical conventions of apostrophes, quotations for dialogue and complete sentences.

The text is also filled with wonderful Newfoundland expressions which are scattered throughout the text. They certainly bring a smile to your face.

I didn't especially like this book, mainly because I could not identify sympathetically with Rockwell Kent. He was so condescending and selfish, demanding the world fit to his needs but not ready to make any significant personal effort to fit in. He was a man who wanted everything for himself. A man with an oversized ego who could not fathom the way a newcomer should act when trying to fit into a small isolated community. And he probably never could. His personality was not the type that could disappear in a small place. Not all men are destined to blend in and it is not always a matter of choice. Kent was one of those men who are never destined to settle down and disappear in such a small place as Brigus Newfoundland. But as a reader I can't help but admire Winter's effort as a writer. He is adept at describing characters and their inner lives as well as the beautiful cold and rugged Newfoundland landscape.

James Murphy says

This is a novel about Rockwell Kent, the artist perhaps most famous for designing the woodcuts illustrating the Modern Library edition of Moby-Dick. But aside from a few minor and passing facts, it's not really a biographical novel. Michael Winter could've given his protagonist a fictional name and his novel would've worked as well. However, it is fact that Rockwell Kent did spend almost 2 years living in Newfoundland beginning in 1914. That's the main thrust of the narrative. The life he and his family lead in the small fishing village of Brigus didn't really engage me. Kent isn't as interesting as the company of quirky townsfolk he lives among. These are much like the flinty eccentrics we sometimes associate with the New England coast. And they're a lot of fun. They're a hoot, as we say, and they're the scaffold supporting most of the novel. Rockwell Kent, good artist that he is, is merely observer rather than catalyst for the narrative. The final 30 pages or so, however, form a kind of coda for everything that's gone before. These final pages allow the novel to soar. Kent himself is proud to consider himself a kind of pagan and he's true here to the real artist who felt much in common with the transcendentalists famous in American tradition. He shows an adroit mind like Emerson's and displays Thoreau's stubbornness in the face of ignorance. In the end the feel is zen. Throughout the novel there's much said about love and its nature but what Kent and others finally realize is that it's of prime importance to discover who you really are and to try to become exactly that.

Lori Bamber says

The Rockwell Kent of this book is unlikable and self-involved, and it was therefore a surprise to me to love this book as much as I did. I think it was partly because he was a man of his time and social sphere, and while he was selfish and careless with the people he professed to love, he also grew in self-awareness over the book.

He asks questions that we all have to answer during our lifetimes: does "being ourselves" mean surrendering to our urges or learning to be the best we're capable of at creating a life of meaning, discipline

and service to others? Where do we draw that line every day? Do we surround ourselves with people who inspire us to reach higher or with those that enable our weaknesses?

The thing I loved most about The Big Why, however, is Winter's descriptions of Newfoundland and the solid, impoverished and indentured people of Brigus, who are confused by this strange and egotistic man but make him welcome ... until they don't.

A remarkable, worthwhile book.

Earl says

Dark NFLD history. One antagonist many protagonists.
